

The two following statements of opinion were broadcast over station KPFA, Berkeley, on July 31, and August 1, 1963, respectively.

BEYOND THE BRACERO SYSTEM Part I

by Henry Anderson

Last May 29, our spokesmen in the United States House of Representatives made one of the most important decisions they have been called upon to make for a long while. The question before the House was: shall the bracero program, under Public Law 78, be extended again as it has been in the past? A "yes" vote meant the bracero system would be continued in its present form until the end of 1965, with every possibility of further extension beyond that date. A "no" vote meant that the system would come to an end on December 31 of this year. The vote was 158 yeas against 174 nays. After half a dozen Congressional blessings since its initial passage in 1951, Public Law 78 is finally to be permitted to die.

I should like to explain why I consider this one of the more significant decisions Congress has made in our time. Then I should like to discuss what seems likely to happen now, as an aftermath of this decision. These events, past and future, ought to be of real concern to every American consumer -- which is to say, every one of us.

What is this word, "bracero?" It is from the Spanish, and means, literally, "arm-man." It might be freely translated as "man who works with his arms and hands" -- roughly equivalent to our phrase "farm hand." And what is the bracero system? On the surface, it is simply an arrangement between the governments of the United States and Mexico, whereby farm workers are brought to this country under contract to fill farm labor "shortages." I hope there are quote marks in my voice as I use that word, "shortages," for this, the most basic concept of the bracero system, is its most fallacious. Suppose that wages in the steel industry averaged eighty-one cents an hour, and there was no overtime, no sick leave, no unemployment insurance, no health or welfare or pension plans, no child labor laws, no minimum wage, no worker representation, and the average worker was able to find employment only a little over a third of the time. If, under these conditions, American citizens preferred to work in other industries, would you say there was a "labor shortage" in the steel industry? Or would you say the "labor shortage" was utterly spurious and artificial, and that the only real shortage was in wages and working conditions? This is the situation in the type of agriculture which claims it needs the bracero system.

Public Law 78 goes on to say that no braceros are supposed to be imported if their presence in this country will have an adverse effect on American workers similarly employed. This is an insult to a rational person's rationality. Since braceros are imported at the very same wages and conditions which Americans have refused as substandard, braceros have always, automatically, by definition, had an adverse effect on the farm labor market. Without their presence, farm wages would have had to rise to attract an American labor force. Growers would have had to make whatever adjustments within their industry were necessary to pay such wages. But within the wonderland of the bracero system, no adjustments were required. Farm wages could be, and often were, frozen at levels intolerable to American citizens, but acceptable to impoverished peasants from underdeveloped Mexico. And this by businessmen who call themselves defenders of a free economy!

Economically, the results have been disastrous. In many parts of the Southwest, American farm workers have been forced to a simple and brutal choice: either accept the standards of Mexican peons, or get out of farm labor altogether. The adverse effect built into the bracero system is most direct and obvious in the case of hired workers, but it is by no means confined to them. Small farmers and their family helpers have had the value of their labor devalued in very much the same manner, and to the same extent, as hired farm workers -- even though they may not realize it. Family farmers have left the land by the tens of thousands, and their farms are absorbed by farming corporations. No more than 2% of the country's growers have ever used braceros; they have tended to be heavily concentrated in California and the Southwest -- and they have tended to be industrialized growers. The largest bracero-user in California last year, for example, was the California Packing Corporation, which used 1,456 braceros. Is CPC a "farmer?" It is a \$200,000,000 corporation whose profits are so good it has split its stock twice in recent years.

As a matter of fact, the bracero system has even had an adverse effect on bracero-users themselves, if they only recognized it. Lured on by an unlimited

supply of cheap labor, artificially created by an act of Congress, growers have thought they could make a quick killing by greatly expanding their plantings of tomatoes and other crops -- without regard for the demand of the marketplace. Returns to growers for many crops have dropped during the bracero era, but instead of analyzing their problems properly, they have attempted to recoup by ever and ever more and cheaper labor -- the very root of their troubles.

But, devastating as its economic damage has been, the greatest and most basic evil of the bracero system is political, sociological, psychological -- and moral, if I may use that word in an age which seems not to believe in morality any more. The bracero system is a captive labor system. That is the long and the short of it. We call ourselves the leaders of the free world, and yet we have tolerated a system of imported peonage within our borders for these many years.

What do you think of when you think of the concept, freedom? Freedom of association, perhaps? If braceros attempt to band themselves together, they are shipped back to Mexico. Freedom to move, perhaps? If braceros leave the place to which they are assigned by their masters, they are apprehended as surely as runaway slaves, and shipped back to Mexico. Freedom to petition for redress of grievances? If braceros complain, they are blacklisted as troublemakers and shipped back to Mexico. Freedom to have a family? Braceros are denied the right to family life so long as they remain in our country. Freedom to communicate and to receive communications? When Americans have tried to talk with braceros, they have been arrested, found guilty, and the judgment has been upheld in an appellate court of the State of California.

Do you believe, as I believe, that freedom ought to mean choice between viable alternatives? Braceros have no choices. They must work for whomever they are told, doing whatever they are told, wherever they are told, for as long as they are told, under whatever conditions they are told. Their choice is only between selling themselves into indentured servitude in the United States, or staying in Mexico and slowly starving to death. This is not a choice between viable alternatives. The choice between slavery and starvation is freedom's opposite; it is a classical wellspring of despotism.

But the Governor of California, a liberal Democrat, sees nothing wrong with the bracero system. He urged the extension of the program this year. The President of the United States, a liberal Democrat, sees nothing wrong with the bracero system. He also urged its extension this year. This is the same gentleman who uses the word, freedom, so generously when he is talking about Cuba or Berlin. The record of conservatives is, if anything, worse. Last month, the California Republican Assembly voted for revival of the bracero program. The Honorable Mr. Goldwater is an ardent supporter of the bracero system. This is the same gentleman who will solicit your vote next year on the grounds that he believes in freedom. Words are losing all meaning...

To the best of my knowledge, there is only one labor system in the world to match the bracero program for unvarnished tyranny, and that is the way mine operators and planters in the Union of South Africa obtain contract workers from native kraals, where the Bantus are kept penned until they are so wretched and desperate they are willing to accept whatever is offered. South Africa, interestingly enough, is also a charter member of the "free world."

Time does not permit me to develop fully this point: that the bracero system, in its essence, is a rape of freedom. Time does not permit me to develop the parallels between the bracero system and the chattel labor system which we may have thought was abolished by the Emancipation Proclamation exactly one hundred years ago. If anyone cares to pursue this subject, he may be interested in my booklet, Fields of Bondage. For further information, I may be reached in care of this station.

It may seem, in view of the Congressional action of May 29, that the bracero issue is mercifully behind us and that I am merely dragging over the dead embers of history. I suggest this is not the case. If there is one thought I want to leave with you, it is this: the bracero system is not an isolated phenomenon. It is a manifestation of an enduring cast of mind which I propose to call the plantation mentality. Among other things, this cast of mind insists on large-scale agriculture rather than an agriculture of **freeholders**. It insists there is something demeaning and degrading about working on the land -- that the people who own the land should not be expected to work on the land. And it insists that large-scale agriculture must have unrestricted access to one or another form of captive labor.

This is the attitude on which the plantation economy of the ante-bellum South rested -- the attitude which was somehow able to rationalize human slavery

in the midst of a society which called itself God-fearing and democratic. It is the same attitude on which the plantation economy of California and the Southwest has always rested. The large-scale, industrialized California agriculture which we may take for granted is not by any means rooted in the natural order of things. It assumed its present form because of the prior existence of a large pool of Chinese coolie labor which was discharged into the Central Valley in 1869, upon completion of the Southern Pacific Railroad. In later decades, the Chinese coolies were replaced by contract workers imported from Japan, who were in turn replaced by one after another group of workers who invariably had a distinguishing characteristic in common: they were so disadvantaged, so inarticulate, so desperately poor, they were willing to work under conditions tantamount to captivity. The list includes Hindus, Arabs, Filipinos, Dust Bowl refugees, prisoners-of-war, convicts, wetbacks, and braceros. Labor standards in California agriculture -- or the absence of standards -- have always been set by the latest in the apparently endless chain of captive workers.

California growers have come to assume that they have an inherent right to a captive labor force. The corruption of the plantation mentality has gone so far that California growers assume it is the government's responsibility -- that is, taxpayers, you and me -- to provide them with their captive workers.

The plantation mentality dies hard, when it dies at all. The Emancipation Proclamation did not abolish the captive labor tradition of the Old South. A system of sharecropping and tenant farming was developed which was not very different in kind from chattel slavery. The stories we read in our newspapers daily, from Georgia, and Alabama, and Mississippi, are terrible evidence that the plantation mentality never really died, and the captive workers have not yet really been freed.

Just so, I suggest that the battle over the bracero system is not really over. The larger battle, of which this is only a part, may never be over. There is an irrepressible conflict between two radically different visions of agriculture: one of free men, and the other of workers in some form of bondage. This conflict will haunt our consciences because agriculture is and will continue to be the most necessary of all human endeavors. And the conflict will haunt us because it is worldwide. It has been the basis for most Latin American revolutions, and will be the basis for those which are almost certain to come. It is the basis for most of the bitterness in Africa. Amid all the talk of industrialization, we should not forget that most of the world is still primarily agrarian, and the cry for agrarian justice and land reform moves more human beings than the cry for industrial justice. But even while bondage is particularly conspicuous in agriculture, here and abroad, you may, if you like, view this form of liberation as part of the overarching quest which will continue so long as it is possible for any men, anywhere, in any manner, to hold any other men in thrall.

I urge you, then, to bear these things in mind: the plantation mentality; the captive labor tradition which is as old as California agriculture itself; the entire, complex, entrenched institution which has been erected on this foundation, and which, in the manner of social institutions generally, has sent tentacles deeply into our other social institutions -- economic, educational, political, judicial, and all the rest.

What will happen now that the bracero system seems destined to expire on December 31? Given the background I have sketched, several things are all too likely to occur. In the first place, bracero-users are going to press for restoration of their system in this session of Congress. They are already doing so. They are attempting to exploit the usual liberal weakness for compromise by saying, "If you won't let us have a two year extension of our system, the only reasonable thing is to let us have a one year extension." They may get it. They have powerful and wealthy friends and allies. And opponents of the system may be exhausted after their long battle for abolition. Their guards are down. The vote of May 29 may well be overturned before the present session adjourns. All kinds of curious things become possible in the frantic final few days of a Congressional session.

What if the bracero-users do not get their system restored this year? It is scheduled to expire, you recall, on December 31. At that time the great majority of bracero-users will be in the middle of the winter slack season without any labor needs at all. But there are two significant exceptions. The Imperial Valley lettuce harvest will be in full swing. And so will the Southern California harvest of lemons and navel oranges. Both these crops are heavily dominated by bracero labor, even though both industries are in monopolistic positions and could well arrange to pay whatever would be required to attract American workers. Will they do so? I doubt it very much.

Consider the situation. Potential profits in the winter lettuce and citrus crops are perhaps on the order of fifteen million dollars. Bracero-users are playing for much larger stakes than that. The total farm wage bill in California is now about half a billion dollars a year. If farm wages rose to the level of other industrial wages, they would total at least a billion and a half dollars a year. The difference -- one billion dollars a year -- is the stake industrial agriculture is really playing for. By comparison, a fifteen million dollar loss, for one season, does not seem so very great.

Perhaps you anticipate what I am suggesting. It is altogether within the realm of possibility that citrus and lettuce growers will deliberately let their crops go unharvested this coming winter to show Congress that "Americans won't do farm labor." Growers can accomplish this in the easiest possible manner: by simply doing nothing. By sitting back, offering the same old wages and working conditions and indignity which Americans have long rejected as intolerable. Losses sustained by individual growers will be underwritten by the industry as a whole, in much the same manner the Council of California Growers and other labor-busting organizations have been underwritten in the recent past. And the corporation executives and Madison Avenue types who really make the decisions in the name of California's 90,000 growers will pull out all the stops in their public relations machinery. Somehow, the phrase "crops rotting in the fields" has a visceral appeal which otherwise reasonable men seem unable to resist. I warn you in advance to expect to hear this phrase many times in the months ahead, even though I can tell you in the interests of strict accuracy that lettuce, when left to its own devices, does not rot. It just goes to seed.

Will Congress be able to hold out against this kind of hysteria? You are able to judge the courage of Congress as well as I. But let us assume, for the sake of discussion, that Congress does hold out. Will industrial agriculture go about its proper business of recruiting and training a labor force of American workers, under American conditions? The odds are still against it.

The plantation mentality, as we have said, changes slowly. Bracero-users will have another recourse. If Public Law 78 is not revived amid the manufactured crises of next winter and spring, there will still be a way agricultural employers can get foreign workers into the country: under Public Law 414, the Immigration and Nationality Act of 1950, more commonly known as the McCarran-Walter Act. Among other things, this law says that workers shall not be admitted from abroad if the U.S. Secretary of Labor determines that their presence will adversely affect the wages and working conditions of Americans similarly employed. But for all practical purposes, this portion of the law has been nullified by a wholly arbitrary policy of the Departments of Labor, Justice, and State. The Departments have decided not to make any investigations into adverse effect if a given employer imports fewer than 25 workers at any one time.

You haven't heard, and you won't hear, about workers being imported through this administrative loophole by, say, automobile manufacturers. That industry is organized, and the United Auto Workers, needless to say, wouldn't stand for any such connivance. You haven't heard, and you won't hear, about workers being pulled through the loophole from Africa or Asia, because the McCarran-Walter Act is a racist law, and Africans and Asians are almost wholly excluded. But Mexico is exempt from the quota system of the Act. And Southwestern agriculture has no organized labor movement worthy of the name. The only reason industrial growers have not made more use of the McCarran-Walter loophole to date is that it was even simpler for them to get braceros. Take away the braceros, and workers under the McCarran-Walter Act, as it is presently administered, will begin to hold a fatal fascination for the plantation mentality.

As a matter of fact, the shrewder California growers have already imported some thousands of workers under this new system, during the past two or three years. They call them "green cards," because of the color of the identifying document the workers are required to carry at all times. The card, you see, is more important than the flesh-and-blood human being who carries it. Remember this phrase: "green card." I believe the next great battle in the long war between the plantation mentality and free men will be waged over this issue.

"Green card" workers are captives almost as surely as braceros are, and in much the same ways. They come to the United States, leaving their families behind them, because they are driven by the knout of hunger. In order to get the necessary credentials, they must pay large bribes, which are as illegal as they are universal in this system, just as in the bracero system. To pay

these bribes, a penniless Mexican peon must go deeply into debt to a money-lender or labor contractor on the Mexican side of the border, who is in league with the employers on the U.S. side. These debts constitute a club over the head of the workers to ensure that they, like the braceros, will work, uncomplainingly, at whatever wages they are offered, and all the rest of it: the whole unsavory captive labor tradition all over again.

If bracero-users fail in the efforts to overturn the Congressional decision of last May 29, I venture to predict that next year there will be 70,000 "green card" workers in California's fields, replacing the 70,000 braceros who were here last year. That is, unless something is done about the conditions which gave rise to the bracero system in the first place; unless some countervailing force in our society emerges to challenge frontally the plantation mentality in the Southwest, as it is starting to be challenged in the Southeast.

What might these countervailing forces be? How might the underlying conditions be changed? How can we use this opportunity to move beyond the bracero system -- to convert our fields of bondage to the free and blooming fields they ought to be? I should like to discuss these questions with you in my next program.

BEYOND THE BRACERO SYSTEM

Henry Anderson
July, 1963

Part II

In my last program, I pointed out that Congress recently voted to let the bracero system expire at the end of this year. I defined this system as essentially a captive labor arrangement. I suggested that the bracero system is only the latest in a long procession of various forms of captive labor in plantation agriculture. Most of my previous remarks were devoted to an unsentimental look at what California growers are likely to do now that Congress has voted to end the Mexican National system. I predicted that the plantation mentality, left to its natural impulses, is going to search for some substitute form of captive labor. I said that the chances are all too good this search is going to succeed. But I ended by suggesting that the termination of the bracero system could become a real turning point toward a new and infinitely preferable farm labor tradition -- if we care enough to insist upon it. I should now like to develop this thought with you.

California agriculture is a gigantic and vital industry. But it is a giant which has never matured. It is irresponsible, because society-at-large has allowed it to behave irresponsibly, on the absurd premise that industrialized agriculture is "farming" and that farming is not really a business but a way of life, like a religious vocation, and therefore exempt from the things we usually require of businesses. The irresponsibility of corporate agriculture takes many forms, but perhaps the most spectacular is the assumption that this industry is not responsible for attracting, and retaining, and managing its own labor force -- a labor force made up of American workingmen.

Corporation growers, from their executive suites on Madison Avenue, or Wall Street, or the equivalent, issue press releases that "Americans just won't do farm labor." As you hear this nonsense in the months ahead, I trust you will bear in mind the truth that there are, in fact, many more American farm workers than there are jobs for them. Here are some of the places growers could find workers if they really wanted to.

First, in the "shoestring communities" on the fringes of every city and town in every agricultural area of California. Thousands of the domestic farm workers who have been driven out of the farm labor market by the bracero system are living in these shacktowns.

Second, there are huge pools of unemployment close to areas of agricultural production. There are hundreds of thousands of unemployed in Los Angeles, for example, at the same time thousands of braceros are imported into the area on the pretext of a "labor shortage." There are thousands of unemployed at the northern end of Alameda County, at the same time braceros are imported into the southern end of the county. This is a kind of madness which must stop.

Third, agricultural workers in many parts of the state are without work, in the midst of a slack season, at the very time growers in other regions are crying "labor shortage" and the government is obediently shipping in braceros from two thousand miles away. Perhaps you remember a story which appeared on the front page of the San Francisco Chronicle last winter. A woman in Kern County gave birth to triplets, but instead of regarding this as a joyful event, she regarded it as "the worst thing that ever happened" to her. Her husband was a farm laborer, there is almost no farm work in Kern County in the winter, and farm workers are excluded from unemployment insurance. I suppose most readers shrugged, and thought "Too bad," without any inkling of the most tragic part of that story. There was no need for the husband to have been unemployed. There is a great deal of farm work in California in the winter -- in the Coachella Valley, in San Diego County, in the citrus belt from Orange through Santa Barbara Counties, and in the Imperial Valley. But it is done by braceros. The Kern County family, along with tens of thousands of other farm labor families who don't make headlines because they don't have triplets, are all victims of the prevailing madness which allows growers to complain of "labor shortages" when just over the Tehachapis there is a surfeit of farm workers.

Such reservoirs of domestic workers would be more than sufficient to meet the artificial "farm labor crisis" you will be hearing about in the months ahead. But if they were not, there would still remain the largest domestic farm labor pool of all. A million and a half farm laborers have been displaced by the introduction of the mechanical cotton picker in the South. The civil

rights movement in the South and elsewhere should recognize that there is not just a problem of being allowed to eat in urban places of public accommodation. There is a grave problem of having anything at all to eat at home in the rural areas. It calls for a coming together of the civil rights movement and the farm labor movement. I shall return to this point.

In the coming months, you are going to hear a lot of agitation in favor of forcing people off the relief rolls to do farm work, and a lot of talk about putting students to work in the fields during summer vacations. During this agitation, I hope we do not lose sight of our proper goal, and the means we have to employ if we are ever to reach it. The goal we are here suggesting is an agricultural industry which behaves as an industry should in the middle of the 20th Century in the most highly developed economy the world has ever known. We will never reach such a goal through the exploitation of cheap, substandard, disadvantaged, captive labor. The kind of student employment which growers and government agencies are currently advocating will keep farm wages at their present intolerably low levels, and will, in effect, displace domestic farm workers in the same manner the bracero system has done. And the "work or starve" edicts which growers are going to demand from county welfare departments will be just another link in the captive labor chain. Under present conditions, a man can usually earn less working in agriculture than he can by drawing county welfare. If he is forced to do farm labor at existing wage levels, or starve, he will be no better off than a bracero: a captive worker, under exactly the same kind of economic lash. Far from curing the sickness of the farm labor market, this would only perpetuate it.

There is another possibility on which I would like to comment briefly. In 1942, I was attending high school in the Santa Clara Valley. Apricots were the major crop in the area. The United States had just entered World War II. Many young men had volunteered for the armed forces. The apricot growers needed pickers. They turned to the communities of that Valley -- Palo Alto, Los Altos, and the rest -- and they said, in so many words, "We are all in this thing together. This is a crop the whole community benefits from; the whole community has a responsibility to help with it." So we went out: housewives, teachers, businessmen, workers from other industries, people from every walk of life. Even growers themselves helped pick their own crop. Apricot picking is skilled work (like most agricultural labor), and we broke some limbs, and pulled off some spurs, and picked some green fruit, but somehow or other we got in the crop. By the following year, the bracero system had begun, and we all sank back into irresponsibility again.

If there is a genuine community crisis -- a genuine possibility that food might go unharvested -- the community could be called on to meet that crisis, as it was in 1942. I see a virtue in this beyond the mere fact it is a viable way to harvest fruits and vegetables. I think it is a good thing for people to be responsible. I think it is a good thing for our tight division of labor and high degree of segmentalization to break down. I think it is a good thing for us to find out what is going on just over the hill, or just outside the city limits. And, particularly, I think it would be a good thing for groups to start becoming communities in the proper sense of that word. We say that we live in communities, but we are strangers to one another. If harvests might draw us together in a common endeavor, and might break down a little of our ostrangement, this could be a very good thing. But I think that the remedy for the basic dehumanization of our kind of society is going to have to cut deeper. If it is sloughed off on agriculture, and everything else remains the same as it is now, we might be doing little more than preserving the myth of agricultural "differentness". Appeals to community responsibility could easily be used as a cover for artificial labor shortages -- artificial for the same reason they are now. I passionately wish to see meaningful communities develop -- that is to say, meaningful relationships between man and man -- and I would be very much interested in the contributions agriculture could make to this process. But it must be in concert with other strands in our social fabric, not in isolation from them.

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California growers used about 70,000 braceros last year, at the peak. I have pointed out a number of labor pools large enough to fill these jobs many times over. But to point out potential farm workers is not enough. Agricultural employers are going to have to do something better than offer jobs at piece rates which may pay a dollar an hour if you apply yourself hard enough; where there is no wage floor; where there is work only four months out of the year; where there is no unemployment insurance the rest of the year; where you may work twelve hours a day, without overtime pay; where, if you get sick, it will be on your own time; where there are no holidays, and no vacations with pay; where there are no health insurance plans and no pension plans. Some American citizens accept these conditions -- not because they like to; usually because they are victims of racial discrimination and unable to enter any other labor market. But no one should have to accept such conditions in mid-20th Century America. To recruit any additional workers, and hold onto the ones they have, growers must do several things.

First, they must stabilize the employment they offer. They must do this on a day-to-day basis, which we may call "decasualization," and on a year-around basis, which we may call "desoasonalization."

The day to day insecurities of farm labor can be removed through the principle of the hiring hall. Work on the waterfront used to be as chaotic as farm work is today. Longshoremen used to have to get their jobs through "shape-ups", which were a continual gamble, and gave rise to a great deal of bitterness, violence, and corruption. The hiring hall has brought order out of the chaos, and largely eliminated the corruption and violence. Agriculture has not matured beyond the "shape-up" phase. It is going to have to, if it is ever going to recruit and retain American workers.

California agriculture has been allowed to develop other practices which are bound to dishearten any labor force. In most parts of California, the growing season is extraordinarily long. Something could be harvested nearly the year around. Obviously, the longer the period of guaranteed employment, the more attractive the job to potential workers. But growers have never had to try to make their jobs attractive; they have never had to consider the feelings of their workers. They have tended to plant highly speculative, highly seasonal crops -- "flash deals", as they are called in the trade -- with an eye not to potential workers, but only to potential profits. If American workers were unattracted by jobs which lasted only a few weeks or days, there were always braceros, or wetbacks, or "green cards", or somebody else frantic enough to accept anything.

If growers are obliged to cultivate a normal working force, there is a great deal they can do to reduce the wild peaks and valleys of labor demand in their industry. They can diversify their crops. They can ask agricultural experiment stations to develop strains of plants which ripen over an extended period of time -- a reversal of their present requests for strains which ripen all at once. And they can stagger their plantings over a period of weeks, so harvests will be correspondingly staggered.

One major change growers must make, in order to update their industry, is to make their employment more stable and secure. The second -- and all these points are interrelated -- is to develop respect for their workers in place of the contempt they show now. Regardless of other conditions, not many people are going to be eager to work for someone who calls them "winos" and "bums." There is a psychological and sociological dimension of the farm labor problem which the exports, even those sympathetic to the workers, have ignored. But it is going to come back to haunt growers. Ours is a highly materialistic society, but money is not quite everything. Men still have some self-respect, and if they think they enjoy the respect of their employers, they often make economic allowances, as would-be organizers of white collar and retail sales workers ought to have learned by now. On the other hand, where employers have systematically destroyed workers' self-esteem over many years, they are going to have some difficulty overcoming this onus, even if wages rise to the level of the best organized building trades. Almost all of us share to some extent in the amused contempt with which rural workers are regarded in our society, and to that extent all of us are guilty if American citizens are reluctant to work on farms. The chances are you have told, or at least laughed at, jokes in which the butt of the humor was a naive or slow-witted "rube" or "hick." The changes are you have used the expression "cotton-pickin'", as in, "Got your cotton-pickin' hands off the table." Just a harmless folk expression? Think of what it means, for a moment. Ask yourself why no one ever says, "Got your cement-finishin' or truck-driving hands off the table." What we are saying, at a covert level, is that there is something a little amusing and a little contemptible about picking cotton. Amused contempt is the way more serious prejudice begins. Growers and all the rest of us are going to have to get rid of our amused contempt. And, in the meantime, to overcome the stigma we ourselves have created, we are going to have to compensate farm workers -- figuratively and literally.

Which brings me to the third basic change growers will have to make in order to attract and retain domestic farm workers. It will have to become possible for a wage earner to support himself and his family in decency. It is not for me to say how much farm wages should be. That is properly the outgrowth of the collective bargaining process between the principals involved. But I can say how much farm wages should not be. They should not be one-third or less of the average wages in other industries. They should not be below the level of public assistance. They should not be at levels which demean and degrade workers. In other words, they should not be what they are today.

Agriculture is even more derelict in fringe benefits than in the matter of wages, if that be possible. In other industries, the value of fringe benefits is estimated at somewhat more than 80¢ an hour. There are no fringe benefits at all in agriculture. It will have to join the rest of our economy in this respect.

Underlying all these things I have suggested for the cure of the sickness of the farm labor market, is a call for a basic form of therapy -- a radical form of therapy, if you like, in the sense that it strikes at the roots of the disease.

That therapy is organization. Growers will have difficulty, to say the least, doubling and tripling their wage rates unless they organize themselves to obtain a fair return from the canneries and chain stores and other major buyers of their products. They will have difficulty diversifying their crops, and staggering their plantings and harvests, and guaranteeing stable employment, until they organize themselves to cooperate and to stop cutting each other's throats.

None of this is new. Sensible men have known for years that these things would have to be done if agriculture were to take its rightful place in our economic family. But social change does not occur on the basis of good sense or good sentiments. Social change takes place when somebody has enough desire to insist on it, and enough power to overcome the natural inertia of the existing order. It is abundantly clear that the updating of agriculture isn't going to take place through the initiative of agriculture itself.

Where, then, is the thrust going to come from? Some people seem to think we may look to leadership from the administration of the State of California, or from the national administration. They are both Democratic administrations, they call themselves liberal, and they call themselves responsible. But the best that has come from this quarter is a plan by Governor Brown, announced on May 31, which would (1) help growers build more employee housing; (2) recruit students to work in the fields; and (3) spend \$50,000 to study the farm labor problem -- once again. Such a program enthusiastically embraces the very mythology which has brought the farm labor market to its present low estate. Brown's program assumes it is the state's obligation to meet the labor needs of agriculture -- regardless of how inflated growers' labor demands may be, and regardless of the conditions of employment they offer. Brown's Department of Employment is at this moment trying to fill so-called "labor shortages" in strawberries by cajoling 12 and 13 year old junior high school children out into the field factories, under a piece rate system which almost certainly averages less than 50¢ an hour.

One is forced to conclude that our self-styled liberal political institutions are as much a part of The Establishment as our agricultural institutions, and no more likely to face up to the radical therapy required -- until forced to do so. Now we are getting down near the nub of the problem. Is there a power in our society which could knock the heads of Mr. Brown and Mr. DiGiorgio together, and by so doing help them both see things in a necessary new light?

Maybe there is. Maybe organized labor can rouse itself from its slumber sufficiently to do this task which is so clearly its proper duty. Many of the things I have suggested as essential to the modernization of the farm labor market absolutely require the participation of unions representing farm workers themselves. A hiring hall operated by employers alone, or by some government agency, would be a disaster. Wages and fringe benefits set at acceptable levels can scarcely be conceived without worker organization. The whole set of changes needed in agriculture may be likened to an engine which is nothing but an idea until it has a motive force. The motive force to set this particular engine going down the tracks must logically come from labor.

The Packinghouse Workers have a handful of representatives in the fields. The AFL-CIO has had a token organizing committee in the San Joaquin Valley since 1959. A Teamster-ILWU combine has two organizers in the field at the present time. But in view of the magnitude of the job to be done, with 350,000 workers scattered over 90,000 ranches and farms, such efforts by organized labor are hardly to be taken seriously.

Unions have for years complained that the organization of farm workers was virtually impossible so long as the bracero system endured. Now we will find out if this was merely a convenient alibi. Organized labor will now either fish, and fish seriously, or go on cutting bait, in which case everyone will know, once and for all, that labor either lacks the will or the ability to organize the unorganized.

The labor movement is, obviously, the logical force to fight for industrial democracy in our last wholly undemocratic industry. But to do so it will need to become a movement in fact rather than just in name. In very many respects, it has become a social institution rather than a social movement, and as such is part of The Establishment as surely as the Brown and Kennedy administrations, and the DiGiorgio Fruit Corporation. Maybe labor will rise to its present opportunity, with the ending of the bracero system. But maybe it won't. Does that mean there is no hope? Does that mean we must abide an agricultural industry mired in the midst of the 19th Century as the rest of us move on to the 21st? I suggest not.

I suggest there is a court of final appeal in a society such as ours. It may not be used very often any more, but I like to think it still exists. I like to think it consists of the attitudes and opinions and convictions of a great many ordinary, decent, honorable people who have an idea that something isn't right,

and that something ought to be done about it. These aren't the George Moanys and Charles Scullys who make decisions in the name of organized labor -- although many of these people may belong to unions. They aren't the Pat Browns -- although some of them may belong to Democratic clubs. Many of them may not belong to any organization at all. They are just people who have a feeling for what is just and what is unjust. There is still enough freedom left in our society that these people can do something about their feelings. They can go to the next meeting of their local union and say, "Why don't we do something for our brothers out there in the fields?" They can go to the next meeting of their Democratic club and say, "Let's tell Pat Brown some of the facts of life." They can say to their grocer, "I don't like the idea of your handling merchandise produced by slave labor." When the Council of California Growers claims (as it does) that consumers are unwilling to pay enough to support agricultural workers in decency, we consumers -- and all of us are consumers -- can say, "You lie."

If union officials don't respond to these feelings, perhaps they can be replaced. If government officials don't respond, perhaps they can be replaced. We have not yet reached the point where we need feel utterly powerless, where things have been taken entirely out of our hands, where there is nothing we can do. If the whole of the social order seems arrayed against freedom and justice for farm workers, then we can confront the whole of the social order.

I don't suggest the farm labor problem in California and the Southwest is the overriding problem of our age. But I suggest that it is part of several of the overriding problems of our age. It has vital linkages with the world-wide revolution of underdeveloped areas, which is largely an agrarian revolution -- a revolution against what we have throughout these commentaries referred to as the plantation mentality.

Too, the farm labor movement has vital linkages with the civil rights movement. The problems of Southern Negroes and the problems of agricultural workers are both, at bottom, the products of the plantation mentality. It is no coincidence that most farm workers are non-Caucasians, and that most Southern Negroes are farm workers. It is no coincidence that farm lobbyists demanded and received an agricultural exclusion from the Fair Employment Practices Act of California.

You don't have to go to Tallahassee to get arrested for registering your devotion to humanity in human relationships. It happens to those who try it in Tracy, California, on behalf of farm workers. You don't have to go to Birmingham to find police dogs used to intimidate people. This was first done in Stockton, California, in August, 1959. The police dogs were used to intimidate farm laborers who were trying to organize.

There are a good many Americans who care about freedom and justice in a real sense, even while their leaders use the terms in a merely ritual or jingoistic sense. Perhaps there are enough to fight for these values, non-violently, in Manteca and Mendota as well as Mississippi. So far in the human pilgrimage, there have been enough such persons to keep us from destroying ourselves, and from destroying the things which make life worth living. I have a faith that farm workers will come into their rightful inheritance of these things, as we move beyond the bracero system.